

## In northern Montgomery County, residents feel pinched and perplexed

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Squeezed between a macaroni-and-cheese discount bin and six self-checkout stations at the Damascus Safeway, Jill Ochs and two friends have their Bibles opened to Galatians 6. The lesson is Doing Good to All. "God is not mocked," it reads, "for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

Ochs is as comfortable in this conservative rural enclave in Montgomery County as she is unsettled about the politics that surround her, locally and nationwide. "I'm not pleased. We don't share the same values and morals, based on their votes," she said. "I hope there's a big turnover this year - at all levels of government."

With economic distress and voter dissatisfaction shaping contests across the country this election cycle, she could be in luck nationally, at least in the House of Representatives, where polls show the GOP primed to take over. Not so in Maryland, where Democrats in Montgomery and Prince George's County are all but certain to retain their tight grip after Nov. 2 and Democratic Gov. Martin O'Malley is leading in his rematch with his Republican predecessor, Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

Montgomery's Republicans are almost completely shut out of government power. The county's eight state senators, 24 delegates, nine council members and the county executive are Democrats. A pair of planning board members and an appointee who oversees the sewage system are Republicans, but they got their jobs through a kind of arrangement for non-Democrats.

But Damascus is different. Thanks to geographic realities and political deal making, Republicans outnumber Democrats within a set of jury-rigged boundaries on Montgomery's northern edge. Out of the county's nearly 1 million residents, 5,809 Republican voters living here amid the soybean and corn fields lucked into having a member of Congress from their own party.

"It's a red corner, for which I'm very thankful," said Rep. Roscoe G. Bartlett, a nine-term Republican whose 6th District rambles from south of Pittsburgh to east of Baltimore and includes a thumb-shaped bit of territory in Montgomery. While the county "may be predominantly blue," Bartlett said, "that doesn't mean there aren't a lot of red people there."

It's no Republican monolith. The party breakdown in Montgomery's piece of the 6th District - from the county line to south of Damascus - is 40 percent Republican, 39 percent Democrat. But that's far less blue than the rest of Montgomery, where Democrats have a commanding 56 percent to 21 percent advantage. Independents are just over 20 percent in both the Damascus enclave and the county as a whole.

But the pace and tenor of the Damascus area add to a sense of political and cultural distance that is more tangible than its location less than 30 miles from Montgomery's border with the District might suggest.

On a recent day at Tom and Ray's Restaurant on Main Street, a police officer, a pastor, a retired steel fabricator, a glass blower, a real estate agent, and a host of farmers and former farmers gathered for their daily or weekly rituals at a neighborhood hub that opened in 1960.

There's an easel with a Damascus High School Hornets poster up front to honor the hometown football team that dominates night life on Fridays and baby pictures of co-owner Gary Bellison's kids (and deceased co-founder Tom's grandkids) on the corkboard behind the counter.

"The upper county provides sort of a pause," said Tim Simpson, who works nearby and comes in for breakfast on Tuesdays. Fellow parents - many of whom must inch their way down Route 27 in the morning along with commuters from Pennsylvania - can lead harried existences.

Damascus offers "a respite, a calm feeling compared to the rest of their lives," said Simpson, whose 18 years in the community still make him something of a newcomer. "When they get home, they feel like this is a quieter, safer, more restful arena."

It's illegal for restaurants or stores to sell alcohol in Damascus, and efforts in recent decades to overturn that ban have failed. Blueberry pancakes, oatmeal cookie pie and steaming fresh bread pudding are perfectly legal, however.

But such comforts have a tough time changing the moods of many, such as K.W. Miller, who runs an excavating and grading business working on state highways, ballfields and other construction projects that have largely dried up in the weak economy.

"During the Reagan years, we all had plenty of work. During the Bush years, we still had a bit of work," Miller said. "Now we've got zero amount of work. You can't hardly buy a job."

It's the worst he's faced in 40 years of business. The Washington area usually weathers recessions well because of government contracts, but this time it's the pain that has "trickled down," Miller said. Although he hasn't paid attention to politics in the past, "this year I've got to, to try to keep my business going," Miller said. "I've got people who have worked for me for 30 years, and I'm going to have to tell them, 'Hey, you've got to go.' "

He's counting on Republican gains in November, driven by a sense that Democrats from President Obama on down to officials in Rockville have fallen down on the basics.

"You see grass growing in the sidewalks and the curbs and the gutters," said Miller, one of thousands of residents recalibrating expectations of what government will - or can -

do. His daughter-in-law, Sue Miller, helped organize the first annual Clean up Damascus Day, held Saturday, to do some basic neighborhood maintenance.

The banter among old friends comes with bipartisan sniping.

Lawrence Perry has lived in Damascus for more than 30 years. He's a Democrat and used to build steel ducts for school ventilation systems.

"The Democrats aren't doing a damn thing," he said.

"Like the Republicans weren't doing anything," said Leonard Moxley, a Republican who's been in Damascus for half a century.

They're worried about China, about jobs going overseas, about gas prices going up 20 cents in a week.

"They talk a good story, but they don't do nothing," Perry said of politicians across the board.

"Run the country. Just run the country!" Moxley said.

A couple of doors down in the same quiet strip of downtown, beside an empty store front, there are signs of hard economic luck at the Las Vegas Latino grocery and carryout.

Ana Mejia and her husband, Tomas Paz, emigrated from El Salvador and started the shop selling pastries and Peruvian chicken four years ago.

"I like the place. It's quiet, the neighbors right here are good people," Paz said. "You never see people drinking in the street or making a show."

The problem is they don't see enough people, period. With unemployment up, there's been an exodus of potential customers looking for work elsewhere. Others are searching for slightly better prices at bigger stores.

"It's very bad," Mejia said. "They find products maybe pennies less than here. They want to save every single penny because of the recession. When is it going to finish? Many people come here and say, 'The situation is going to be worse and worse and worse.'"

Heading north on the main road out of town, drivers pass scattered lawn signs for Ehrlich and Republican Robin Ficker, who's facing Del. Craig L. Rice (D) in the race for an open council seat representing the far-flung upcounty district.

Robert Hilton raises corn-fed cattle at Dusty Hill Farm, taking orders for shrink-wrapped sections. He tends to vote Republican but has no problem crossing over for the right candidate, although he hasn't followed the local races much. Hobbling on a hurt leg at the end of a long day, he voiced admiration for efforts to jolt the system, whether it's

Michelle A. Rhee's soon-to-conclude tenure as schools chief in the District ("She's giving them a fit.") or tea party candidates knocking off longtime officeholders. ("They're tearing them up.")

He'd like to see incumbents cleaned out. "Not one of them knows how to cut a corner or save a dollar. All they know how to do is tax, tax, tax and more, more, more," Hilton said.

Still, while Bartlett faces Democrat Andrew Duck, a retired Army intelligence officer from Brunswick, in November, Hilton said the incumbent has something to offer. "He's for agriculture, I'll give him that. Too many of them down there aren't," Hilton said.

Jill Ochs sees Damascus as her base for doing good. She volunteers with a church group that helps poor families. "Our goal is to help people become self-sufficient, not just getting them out of the crisis," she said.

And she's impatient for change in Rockville. She's displeased with county budget troubles and a transgender anti-discrimination law passed by the council.

"I think people rely on very firm values here," she said as her group of women, known as the Waterlilyz and formed to promote Bible studies and service, continued exploring Galatians over coffee. "I can sit here and I will see 25 people tonight that I know... It still feels like a small town."